

What's beautiful and has a plug at the end of it?

Hint: electric art

BY MICHAEL POSNER

THE NEW ART Gallery of Ontario is a handsome place, and its opening last fall was an appropriately lavish affair. There were oohs and there were aahs in all the right places, and breathless sighs for Henry Moore's polished genius, and collectors of refined taste sipping in celebration.

And all of this was not other than it should have been. For here was a gallery devoted to Art, and here were people who knew, loved and appreciated Art, who had come to pay their respects.

There is Art, of course, and there is art. And in another part of Toronto, at about the same time, a group of school-children were romping through a far less handsome place, known to a far fewer number of people as The Electric Gallery.

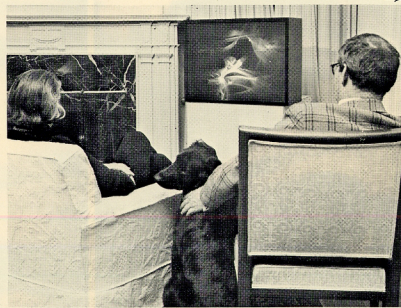
RIGHT: Edmund Meredith watching Earl Reiback lumia. **LEFT:** the lumia colors, generated by prisms, mirrors and quartz crystals, can be frozen at any point by a switch on the box. Says Reiback: "In observing my work, you must participate. You can't learn what I'm doing in a few seconds any more than you could understand a symphony by hearing a few notes"

The Electric Gallery is the only art gallery in the world that exclusively exhibits electric art. Every piece on display has a plug at the end of it. Some pieces shine, some spin, some writhe, some croak, some hum weird atonal sounds, some blink, some spit fire, some sprawl on the floor and some do a number of these things at once.

It is not, assuredly, your average art gallery, and collectors of taste do

not, as a rule, drop by to pay their respects. They have, by and large, few to pay.

In fact, the height of the typical Electric Gallery patron is about four-foot-five: kids. The Markle brothers, Sam and Jack, who founded the gallery five years ago, say kids don't need the rationale that parents look for. They don't have to have electric art explained to them. They respond instinctively. As one

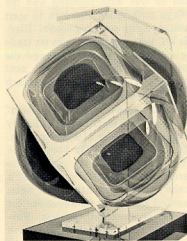


PHOTOS BY FRED BIRD

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pupil wrote after a class tour: "I liked the jelly or the silicone or whatever you call it, and I'm sorry but I couldn't resist taking some off. There was hardly anything I didn't like but my favorite was the bottomless pit that was upstairs. . ."

The adults who come (in the exact reversal of normal attendance patterns, it's kids who schlep parents to The Electric Gallery) are almost afraid to enjoy it. They don't want to be made fools of and deep down they somehow suspect fraud — gimmicky posing as Art. They want to be taken by the hand and told that electric artists have fine-arts degrees from Columbia like everyone else and that respectable museums are actually buying these crazy machines. And then, perhaps, they



Aaronel's revolving cube

will loosen up and start having fun.

The same problem, essentially, has stood in the way of countless new waves: the establishment refuses to accept them as art. But to be considered unworthy or not considered at all is no mean recommendation historically. Guys named Picasso, Rodin, Cézanne, Duchamp once got the same treatment. Says Sam Markle: "Usually a measure of how avant-garde you are is how much people don't like you. And if they really hate you, then you know you must be good."

In the meantime, they come to The Electric Gallery and say things like: "Why that's just a neon tube, for goshsake."

To which the patrons of electric art, in their thin but growing chorus, respond: "So it is. And Henry Moore's sculptures are only lumps of bronze."

The dialectic continues: "But how can electricity — the same power that makes my toast pop in the morning — be considered art?"

"It can't. Electricity is just the medium, like oils, watercolors or egg tempera. Not every piece fashioned in bronze is a piece of art. But by the same token, an artist choosing to work with optics, diodes and logic circuits shouldn't automatically be denied judgment as an artist."

"But it's so mechanical, so programmed, so inhuman . . ."

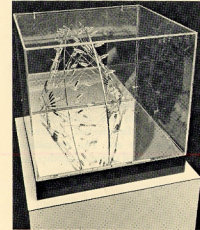
"It's a technological world, brother, and contemporary artists have always used the most modern materials available."

You catch the drift? The gap of sensibility between those reared on conventional concepts of art and the modern techno-artists?

IMPETUS DID. And we thought it would be instructive to do something about it. Like find a family which was well-tutored in the classic arts, but which had never before set eyes on electric sculpture. Arrange a tryst: a visit to The Electric Gallery. Let them choose three or four pieces to put in their home for a fortnight and see what happened . . .

EDMUND AND Buffy Meredith have been serious art buyers for many years. They are not collectors; their tastes are too catholic to accommodate pure collecting. But their home is filled with a nice range of well-chosen works: a stunning Riopelle, some lonely canvases of Jean Paul Lemieux, a couple of early prints by Yves Gaucher and two works of nostalgic realism by Merton Wildman. Most were acquired long before the artists' reputations had been established. "Edmund," says Buffy, "just has a seat-of-the-pants feel for what he likes." Which usually turns out to be pretty good.

The Merediths came to this experiment with considerable relish. Unlike some newcomers to the field, they accepted from the start that electric art is in fact art. They made no artificial distinction between Art that is

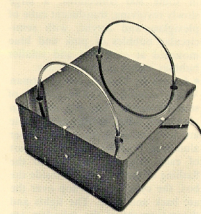


Dworkin's multi-image lights

classic and sacred and art that is everything else. If a piece had form, beauty, craftsmanship, it was art — regardless of whether it were made of clay, acrylics, light sensors or jello. The important line to draw was between good art and bad.

But even they encountered some problems. One cannot tour The Electric Gallery believing that art must always please the eye or always make a statement about the human condition. Many electric artists reject formal pretensions, and even more reject the notion that art must précis the meaning of life. Electric art may be heavy technologically, but its messages for mankind are frequently light.

Cork Marcheschi, for example, one of the gallery's most successful artists, works with raw electric currents, set against the plainest of plywood backdrops. The viewer turns



White's logical "Abacus"

the current on and off as he wishes, watching the coil of energy burn red hot, then cool.

Seeing Marcheschi's work for the first time, one is apt to remark — as Edmund Meredith did — why not apply a high-gloss black finish to the plywood, to provide a more dramatic setting for the glow of the current?

This is the novice's common sin, and it misses what Marcheschi is all about. He has no interest in rendering his work more dramatic. Electricity itself is beauty, and the simpler its form, the more beautiful it becomes. Would one have said to Albers: Say, Joe, how about putting a triangle over here?

But the Merediths were game. They had come to experience and to learn, and they did. And in the end, they were not disappointed.

• One by New Yorker Earl Reiback, once an engineer, in which smoky ribbons of pure color float and drift across a black, TV-like screen. These silent symphonies of light are gener-

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ated by a series of hidden mirrors and prisms, and do not repeat their patterns for 30 hours or more. To the traditionalist, the eye concerned with visual aesthetics, Reiback's serene lumias constitute the perfect introduction to electric art.

- A desk-top acrylic cube by American Leonard Dworkin in which tiny pinpoints of light, arranged in a double arc, flash on and off in random sequence. A mirror on one wall of the cube multiplies the images and the total effect is not unlike that of blinking Christmas lights.

- A piece by Pittsburgh sculptress Aaron, whose work is represented in some 800 collections; a large slowly revolving, translucent cube of plexiglass and acrylic, with semi-circular bubbles of pink and blue mounted at each end and smaller bubbles within the larger ones.

- A work by Toronto artist Norman White: a small box (8 in. x 8 in.) of smoked acrylic. On top, two thin aluminum tubes, looped in a double arc to each side. An even thinner aluminum cylinder is fitted over part of each tube. In response to the flashing of three red lights inside the box, the cylinders flip-flop over the arc back and forth. The lights and the movement of the cylinders are strictly determined by logic circuits inside the box, but to the human eye seem entirely random.

Norman White may be the most successful electric artist in Canada. His work is usually sold before it's finished. The National Gallery has acquired three. The Art Bank owns half-a-dozen. CBC Vancouver has just commissioned a \$37,500 sculpture from him for its new headquarters. In the left field that is electric art, Norman White is the closest thing you'll find to a superstar, and within two years, predicts Jack Markle, people will be knocking down the doors to own his work.

Yet, for the Merediths, the White piece was a real test-case selection. They did not understand the work and felt lukewarm about its looks. In short, they didn't relate and they took it home in the hope that two weeks of exposure might change their opinion.

As for the other three, the question was: would they still like them as much two weeks later?

As it happened, there was some change of attitude but not much. The Reiback lumia, so mesmerizing at first, became a trifle tedious. The Dworkin they enjoyed for its clean, simple form, but felt it to be artistically a little thin.

It suffered by comparison with the Aaron, which emerged as the clear favorite. The Merediths liked to put a light behind it as it turned, to reflect the stately elegance of its form.

And Norman White? The family never did get a satisfying handle on his work. It was too remote, too mechanized.

The Merediths also found that they sometimes wanted to turn things off. Edmund Meredith called it "aggressive art. It leaps out at you and says 'Watch me' and sometimes you don't feel like watching."

In some respects, Meredith added, it's a performing art: pull out the plug and the curtain falls.

This, say the Markles, is the normal, proper reaction. "You wouldn't look at an oil painting for 12 hours. Why would you keep electric art going all the time?"

Nor were the Markles surprised by the cool response to Norman White's piece. The more progressive art is, the harder it is to live with, and White is certainly progressive.

Everyone at a party the Merediths threw during the experiment agreed: they pronounced Reiback "soothing," Dworkin "cute," Aaronel "workmanlike." Norman White they couldn't fathom.

White himself was there, patiently explaining his work to a parade of blank, uncomprehending faces. A biology graduate from Harvard, White has always been fascinated by the "beauty of logical systems" — in nature and technology. "Logic touches our lives every day in every action. Simple rhythm is a division of time in a logical way. A fugue is logical."

"My works are machines, yet they're non-functional; therefore they must be art. The renaissance brought art and science together, and

that's what I do with photo cells and computerized circuits."

Electric art, the Markles concede, is an acquired taste. You start by liking the pretty things, and the more you see, the less appeal they have, and the more excited you become by the Marcheschis and the Whites.

So the Merediths, at least, have begun the journey.

A FEW YEARS back, a student at the Ontario College of Art dropped into The Electric Gallery. He liked what he saw and he went home to experiment. Pretty soon he was spending more time with electric sculptures than he was with painting and the college authorities told him to start painting again or leave school. Electric art, they suggested, was no trade for a serious artist. He ignored the directive, graduated, and the next year the College invited him to teach a course in electric art.

That is a true story, and it is one of the signs that electric art is finally coming of age. The Markle brothers, after taking a \$50,000 bath in the early years, are at last starting to learn the meaning of revenue. Half a dozen gallery artists have been awarded significant commissions for various government projects. Purchases by the National Gallery have produced a domino effect of interest from other museums and cultural institutions. The establishment has conferred its blessing and as a consequence, people off the street are suddenly walking in and making a purchase.

Ironically, the buyers are often people with no previous history of art purchasing. They're often surprised to learn that electric art 'chosen wisely' can be as profitable an investment as the traditional kind.

And meanwhile, back at the handsome new Art Gallery of Ontario, just down the hall from the Henry Moores and the A. Y. Jacksons, stands — you guessed it — a whirling, blinking, humming, flashing piece of electric art. □

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